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ABSTRACT

Recent years have been marked by a decline in the quantity and quality of small group research for four reasons: (1) the experimenter is an integral component of the system he or she is studying and thereby influences the findings, (2) layers of group process defy complete analysis, (3) small group research is reflexive, and (4) much of the variance within and between groups would be explained by variables not included in the research setting. The decline in quality and quantity of current small group research results from both theoretical and methodological deficiencies. Two areas where investigators of group processes need to sharpen their research tools are in the selection of independent variables and in the measurement of dependent variables. Some ways to improve small group communication research are for investigators to direct their efforts to the real world where actual groups operate, to use triangularism or multioperationalism in the measurement of concepts, and to focus more attention on the actual messages that occur in group interaction. By applying research efforts to the groups in the world in which we live, small group researchers will not be faulted for investigating problems for which solutions are unnecessary, unimportant, or make no significant difference. (DF)

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SMALL GROUP RESEARCH = NSD: A HEURISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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SMALL GROUP RESEARCH = MSD: A HEURISTIC PERSPECTIVE

A selective overview of small group research reports published in the last five years could produce some negative and pessimistic findings. For example, no differences were found between the task-oriented communication behaviors of male and female leaders in same gender and mixed gender groups (Alderton & Jurma, 1980). There was no significant difference between the communication behavior of group members in effective decision-making groups and those within ineffective decision-making groups (Hirokawa, 1980). High self-monitors tended to utilize consensus information to a greater than did low self-monitors, although these differences did not reach the required level of significance (Kulik & Taylor, 1981). Research did not support the hypothesis that in competitive groups incompetent members will not be disliked (Rosenfield, Stephan & Lucker, 1981). No significant relationship was discovered between consensus and decision satisfaction or between consensus and the quality of the decision (Hirokawa, 1982). No significant differences were found between pre-interruption behavior, the quantity of male-female interruption behavior, or the post-interruption behavior of males and females (Kennedy & Camden, 1983). Finally, different decision-making procedures do not significantly affect the performance of the best individual group members (Burleson, Levine & Samter, 1984).

Perhaps these findings do little more than illustrate Schachter's (1959) observation that misery loves miserable company, but recent years have been marked by a decline in the quantity and the quality of small group research. Goodstein and Dovico (1979) documented a slow and steady decline in the percentage of small group theory and research articles published in The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. They surveyed five journals where small group research is typically reported and found that behavioral science journals publish from 5 to 19% of their articles in the area of group processes. These figures compare with 12% of the Communication Monographs articles published between 1981 and 1984 that reported small group research. During this period, even less space in Human Communication Research was allocated to small group research. Only 3 of more than 100 articles focused on small group behavior.

The qualitative difficulty faced by those interested in studying small group processes can be attributed to the absence of well-defined and integrated theoretical principles. In his analysis of forty years of group research, Zander (1979, p. 280) observed that "research in group behavior still suffers from an absence of useful and well-stated primary notions."

Mills (1979, pp. 414-416) identified four serious problems that reduce the quality of many attempts to study human groups. (1) The experimenter is such an inextricable component of the system under study that if her or his influence on the subjects and the situation could be determined and accounted for, many of the findings would be fundamentally altered. (2) The layers of group process defy complete analysis. What is studied depends upon the researcher. Whatever is found, far more potential information remains unexamined. (3) Small group research is reflexive. As such, theories should apply to group phenomena after the group members have become aware of those theories. For example, what effect does the knowledge that the person who sits at the head of the table is most likely to be selected as jury foreman have on the behavior of a juror about to enter the deliberation room for the

first time? (4) Much of the variance within and between groups will be explained by variables that have been excluded from the research setting. Another example taken from the area of legal communication research may illustrate how the exclusion or control of critical variables drastically alter the results of group interaction. Except for Maryland, in every state where the death penalty is a possible sentence when a person is convicted of first degree murder or othr serious offense, juries who hear the case must be "death qualified." This means that potential jurors opposed to capital punishment will be excused for cause. Thus, the person's attitude toward capital punishment may eliminate that individual from a group whose task is to determine the defendant's guilt in the case. Ample evidence shows that death qualified juries are conviction prone and harsher in their sentences (Bronson, 1970; Jurow, 1971). Taylor and Buchanan (1982) explained the conviction prone phenomenon in terms of how jurors use evidence to determine guilt. Given the same amount of evidence supporting the guilt of the defendant, those who favored capital punishment found the defendant guilty significantly more often than did those who opposed capital punishment. Thus, the exclusion of potential group members has a direct impact upon not only the group decision but the way the group processes the information available to it.

THE SCARCITY OF SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES

The decline in the quantity and quality of current small group research results from both theoretical and methodological deficiencies. Quality research reports will appear in greater numbers when there are more quality research reports available. Lander (1979, p. 280) observed that "the soundness of knowledge increases as key ideas in a field are more neatly defined. When concepts become more valid and more commonly accepted, new results of research will more easily be integrated into a growing body of wisdom."

The two areas where investigators of group processes need to sharpen their research tools are in the selction of independent variables and the measurement of dependent variables. Too often, variables that logically seem important to effective decision-making will not produce outcomes sufficiently different to be accepted as significantly different. Two examples from graduate thesis projects illustrate the point. Page (1983) hypothesized that leaders who intereact frequently with group members and who provide high quality orientation statements will help their groups achieve higher quality decisions than will leaders who interact infrequently and provide little orientation for their groups. The problem faced by the groups was a variation of the NASA exercise called "Lost at Sea." Groups were to arrive at consensus concerning the value of fifteen items to a group of survivors adrift in a rubber raft somewhere in the South Pacific. The hypotheses were not supported. High and low degrees of orientation produced no significant difference in decision quality. Why? It can be argued that the difficulty resulted not from the inability of orientation behavior to provide needed direction to groups in the real world solving problems and accomplishing tasks. Unfortunately, college students have little knowledge or experience with being lost at sea. Their pooled lack of familiarity with the task produced equally mediocre decisions in spite of the leaders' best efforts to provide orientation.

Cluett (1984) reasoned that groups trained in group process and orientation behavior will be more effective problem solvers than will groups

that receive no special training. Fifteen groups viewed a slide presentation that covered the basic principles of groups process and the need for orientation as the group discusses its task. Fifteen other groups viewed a slide presentation on art appreciation. The group task was to select the best of four applicants for a position on the school's Editorial Board. No significant difference was found between the quality of the decisions arrived at by trained groups and the quality of the decisions reached by the untrained groups. Do these findings suggest that groups will not profit from instruction in group process and orientation behavior? Hardly. This investigation suggests that an eight-minute training session will have too little impact to produce significant differences.

Imprecise measuring instruments represent the major reason why so many group studies conclude with NSD. Questionnaire responses, semantic differential evaluations, item ranking accuracy, content analysis frequency counts and the use of trained observers cannot be expected individually to measure accurately complex and interdependent variables. Biddle, Slavings and Anderson (1985, p. 92) tersely described the dilemma faced by small group researchers: ". . . causation is a mystical condition that is approachable, but not attainable. Social phenomena are sufficiently complex that we can never specify, let alone measure, all possible contributing variables."

METHODOLOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

If the complexity of human behavior and the uniqueness of group transactions combine to reduce the generalizability of research findings, investigators of group process would be advised to concentrate on improving the significance of their efforts. This will be accomplished neither easily nor without a change in the traditional approach to group research. Shaw (1976, p. 403) recommended that researchers turn away from "the elegant treatment of trivial problems."

Small group researchers should seek significance, not in their statistical tables, but in the problems they investigate. As Shaw (1976, p. 406) asserted: "Significant problems must be attacked even if it means using less than perfect research procedures." There are those, however, who would observe that significance is in the eye of the beholder. That is not the issue. The point is that small group research, for a variety of reasons, is not as popular, relevant or significant as it was thirty or even twenty years ago.

Some things can be done to rebuild interest in group research. Investigators should direct their efforts to the real world where actual groups operate in natural settings over extended time periods (Miller, 1984). Another suggestion that would improve the validity of group research is the use of triangulation or multi-operationalism in the measurement of concepts. Triangulation "allows for a broader, more diverse measurement of a concept, thereby helping to avoid the discovery of so-called self-fulfilling research results" (Snizek & Fuhrman, 1980, p. 96).

A third way to improve small group communication research is to focus more attention on the actual message exchanges that occur in group interaction (Miller, 1984). Much prior research controlled, ignored or simulated message statements to study other group variables. Investigators need to remember the primary reason for conducting research, to understand and predict human

communicative behavior. The communication itself represents the heart of the group. What members communicate should be the central focus of scholarly inquiry.

We live in a world of groups. By applying our research efforts to the problems faced by families, work groups, volunteer organizations and government agencies, small group researchers will not be faulted for investigating problems for which solutions are unnecessary, unimportant or make no significant difference.

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